GOD HAS MANY NAMES:
III. FATHER -- MOTHER

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Scripture
Isaiah 49:13-19
Luke 15:11-24

"Can a woman forget her nursing child?...yet I will not forget you."
--Isaiah 49:15 (NRSV)

"...while he was still far off, his father saw him...he ran and put his arms around him...."
--Luke 15:20 (NRSV)

Who is God? The question is posed, of all places, not in a lecture hall at McCormick Theological Seminary, or a philosophy classroom at the University of Chicago, or even an adult education seminar at Fourth Presbyterian Church, but on the cover of Life Magazine, December 1990. The cover article is a series of personal stands by a wide variety of people; Bishop Tutu, Orel Hershiser, film writers, farmers. It is an urgent, personal question and their answers are not at all academic.

In addition, on the first page of the New York Times Book Review, there is a review of The Spiritual Life of Children, by Robert Coles, who asked many children:

"What do you think God is like?"

It is, I believe, an issue about which we are very much concerned.

Who is God? In some way, perhaps so deep in your soul you don't even know it's there, that question is what got you out of bed and in spite of some very attractive alternatives, coffee, newspaper, good TV Sunday morning and the Bears at noon, brought you to this place.

We have in recent weeks been thinking about it under the general rubic, God Has Many Names.

Two of those names are Creator and Provider... This morning Father - Mother...

Is God male? If God is a male, exactly what male characteristic describes God? Is God a virile, strong, aggressive warrior; or a quiet, sensitive artist? Or is God the bearded grandfather imagined by so many in

our culture? Is God female? If God is female - which female characteristics?... fertile earth mother, homemaker, Celtic warrior or Prime Minister?

The topic this morning makes us uncomfortable. It has made some people angry. Our church, on occasion, circulates a questionnaire among a professionally selected sample of Presbyterians to find out what people are thinking about things. On the topic of gender inclusive or exclusive language about God: 7% think it is an issue of the highest priority to alter God-language so that it is inclusive; 8% are adamantly opposed to any change. 85% don't care much one way or the other. For some - about 15% - it is a hot issue. For most it is "Ho-hum."

What exactly is the issue? What actually is wrong with calling God "Father" and using masculine pronouns - "he, him, his," to refer to God? After all, the Bible does. Jesus did. What's the problem?

The problem is that the first and most important thing the Bible says about God is that God is not male or female. God includes both human maleness and human femaleness. The second part of the problem is that language is powerful. What you call a thing or a person inevitably shapes how you think and how you act. We know that if the one thing you say to a child over and over is "you're stupid; you're no good; you're lazy;" not only will that child begin to believe it, that child in a mysterious way will become what you have named him. Worse yet, you will relate to that child on the basis of the names you use.

No one was ever more aware of that than the propagandists of the Third Reich whose job was to persuade the German people that the ultimate solution to the "Jewish Problem" was acceptable. They began, simply, with language: "Jewish Problem," and then "Swine - pig" linked linguistically with filth and with slaughter. A particular favorite designation was "bacillus" which everybody knows must be stamped out, eradicated. Racism begins not with laws but with nouns, not with ghettoes but with adjectives. And when a whole culture becomes convinced that a minority is greedy, dirty, subversive, or lazy, slow, stupid, the results are often sequential generations of majority and minority who believe it and begin to act it out. We know - or should know - that descriptive language is not neutral: that it not only reflects the reality we are trying to describe, it often shapes that reality, or our relationship to it.

So what you call God does more than describe or image the Almighty - it shapes your own spirituality.

And if the only language you have for God is masculine language; if the only thing you ever call God is father; if the only images of the divine which pop into your head are male or an authority figure; or a judge, or a monarch... your spirituality is not being shaped and formed by the Bible, but by the culture and the language it uses. In fact, if the only names you have for God are masculine names, you are missing an important and wonderful part of Biblical truth which is that God, being God, is unknowable and unnameable but that in terms of our relationship with God, God has many names.

The genius of our Jewish forebears, back at the beginning of the story, is that they know God is the Holy One, the mysterious one, the one like none other, the one whose holiness and otherness is invaded when you start to construct images - little statues, for instance, or verbal statues, names. Israel's God is unnameable... for a reason, and that is that names limit and shape. When Moses is addressed by the voice of God in the desert and told to go back to Egypt and lead the slaves to the freedom of the promised land, he asks a very understandable question: "What's your name? When the people ask me who sent me, what shall I say?" And the only answer he gets is not a name at all, but a curious combination of consonants that sounds like YAHWEH and is actually a verb. God is a verb! "I am who I am" is God's name. "Tell them 'I am' sent you," God says.

So when the late Paul Tillich caused everybody to scratch their heads and roll their eyes at his Germanic obscurity by teaching that we ought to have a moratorium on talk about God... and that the only way to do it was to call God "the Ground of Being," he really was quite faithful to the first and most important thing the Bible says about God.

Harvard professor, Harvey Cox, writing in The Christian Century this month, points out that when people become too certain about the reality of God, unfortunately things start to happen:

> "We should learn from the ancient
> Jewish tradition of not pronouncing
> the name of the Holy One, live through
> a period of reverent reticence in religious
> language, and wait for the spirit to make
> known a new vocabulary that is not tarnished
> by trivialization and misuse."
> [Christian Century, 11/7/90,
> "The Secular City 25 Years Later."]

You see, the trouble with gender exclusive language is that it misses the reality and therefore, because it is only a portion of the truth, it becomes an idol. Idols, like heresy, are not so much wrong as incomplete. In religion, idols prevent people from encountering the wholeness, the mystery, the unspeakable beauty, the indescribable love of God.

The God of the Bible is above gender. The Holy One is unlike the other gods. The earliest story is very clear actually on the topic. If you are going to dare to image this God - to create a mental picture - you have to have a man and a woman. "Let us make humankind in our image," God says in the first chapter of Genesis... "So God created humankind in his image...male and female."

Vanderbilt theologian, Sallie McFague, asks simply "Because the point is self-evident, one wonders what all the fuss is about when the suggestion is made that God be 'imaged' in female terms or addressed as 'she'." [Models of God, p. 97]

Part of the fuss, I suppose, is innocent enough. The Bible itself uses masculine images and masculine pronouns, "Male and female, he created them."

Israel knew God was unnameable. Israel also knew that many of the deities in the region were female: Goddesses. Judaism's early masculine tilt has to do with the need to distinguish its Holy One and itself from the Babylonians and Persians and particularly the Canaanites, who worshipped fertility and for whom prolific, sexually active female figures were theologically suggestive.

And, in addition, it was a patriarchal society. Most were. The men had the power, owned the property, made the decisions, wrote the history and got to decide on the pronouns. There are no gender-free personal pronouns, so the Bible calls God he and him, rather than she and her or it.

But the tradition and the Bible is not exclusively male. In Psalm 22 God is a midwife. In Psalm 123 a mistress. In Isaiah 42 God is a woman in labor, giving birth. "As one whom he comforts, so will I comfort you, says the Lord" in Isaiah 66. And one of the loveliest of all, in Hosea 11:

> "When Israel was a child, I loved him...
> I taught them to walk...
> I took them up in my arms...
> I bent down to them and fed them."

Those are clearly maternal images. The one who bends down to feed children is a nursing mother. There are two things you can't do for your children, men, no matter how profoundly you share the joys and duties of parenting, and that is bear them in your body and nurse them.

Feminist theology suggests that God's exclusively masculine nomenclature is neither Biblical nor authentically historical. Our own history is actually very interesting. The early Christian community, unlike the culture around it, welcomed women, gave women positions of authority and prestige. Clearly Jesus was a revolutionary in including women in the family of disciples, elevating the position of women, honoring their humanity and integrity and strength. Women are there at the beginning and at the end. Women are there at the cross after all the men have fled for their lives. Women are the only ones who trust the promise of resurrection and women are the first ones to believe it when it happens.

It is only when Western civilization, around the fourth century, decided that women were inferior - physically, spiritually and emotionally - and male dominance became complete, that women drop out of all positions of power and authority. It is no coincidence that it is precisely at the time that a church hierarchy emerges, exclusively male, exclusively celibate.

The names of God and the exclusion of women from full participation in the church are not unrelated. The mystics have known it for centuries. Julian of Norwich knew that clergy power and dominance was threatened by her referring to God as our mother.

Beneath this dispute, the real question is the nature of our relationship with God. The fundamental theological question is not "Does God Exist?" but Who is God? My favorite Paul Tillich story is about the time he delivered a public lecture which defined religious faith as "ultimate concern." Afterward he was accosted by an elderly gentleman who said, "Dr. Tillich, I think I understand what you were saying - that whatever is our ultimate concern is our religious faith - but my ultimate concern is whether the ultimate is concerned about me."

That's the question, isn't it? That's the question behind all questions. That's what is behind the poets stretching for language, the art and music of the race, the question still on the cover of our national magazines and our most sophisticated "Book Reviews." It is the question about which writers write novels and it is the only ultimate question of philosophy... Is the ultimate concerned about me? Is there a God who knows I'm here? Is there "being" that knows my name? It's a question we ask academically but also existentially.

It's the question we ask at the beginning of life when we witness the mystery of creation in the birth of a child and at the end of life when we experience the end of life too soon, still incomplete, still loved and treasured and valued, and every day in between when we are filled with indescribable joy and ecstacy and when things come unravelled and life no longer makes sense. Is there anyone who cares?

In their cruel exile 2,500 years ago, the children of Israel asked that question. Violently captured and taken from land and home to live for a generation in a foreign country, facing the extinction of their race, religion, family - they had little reason to trust a God who promised to care for them.

> "Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me
> My Lord has forgotten me.'"

And the prophet Isaiah gave them this stunning picture as an answer:

> "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or
> show no compassion for the child of her womb?
> Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you."

In the worst of times it was a picture they all understood: a picture of a nursing mother... that communicated what they needed and knew about God.

The highest, holiest, fiercest love we know - is not enough to describe God's love for us.

And Jesus answer that same question - this time asked by the young man living in a far country, separated from security, love and home, drifting aimlessly; he knows no one cares about him or for him; no one even knows he exists. This young man returns, in guilt and repentence to a job as a slave. Jesus' answer is that magnificent, unforgettable picture of a father running down the road, tears of joy streaming down his cheeks, embracing the son before the son is able even to make his speech...

Jesus broke through centuries of tradition and used intimate language for the Holy One, parental language: "Abba, father" he said; the only English equivalent for which is "Daddy." And the startling, redeeming point is not gender but closeness, accessibility, responsiveness, passion... of a father or a mother for a child.

And when he died, his own life ebbing out of him and he reached into his memory and recited a portion of Scripture: "Into thy hands I commit my spirit..." [Psalm 31] He could have said "Mother, into thy hands..."

God has many names: "I am what I am." I am what I will be... I will be with you. I am your creator... I am your provider... I am your father... I am your mother. It is helpful - it is freeing - it is expanding and deepening - to try new ones in our praying. And if it is still awkward for us publically and if we simply can't say the pronouns differently, try it in your private, personal relationship with your God, the one who says to you: **I will be - to you and for you - what you need.**

So we come to table and it is suggestive, is it not, that the one who prepared the food for us most of the time was a mother. If we are fortunate, we had a father who cooked also and whose provision for us included the always sacramental experience of setting the table and preparing the food and feeding the young.

But the one experience common to every one of us is that we were nurtured in a mother's body and nursed or fed by the one who bore us.

And it is suggestive, is it not, that our spiritual nurture and nourishment is nowhere more profoundly expressed than at table - the table of the Supper of our Lord - prepared by God - who is our father, God our mother... Amen.